

# VISHNU TEMPLES

## AND

### THEIR PROPER ADMINISTRATION.

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According to the Hindu scriptures (Sastras) God, the Almighty, exist, in five forms, namely (1) Parathva (transcendental), (2) Vyuha (causal) (3) Vibhava (purposive); (4) Antaryamithva (innate), and (5) Archa (physical, in the form of images in temples and houses). Just as God, the supreme object of knowledge (Prameyam) has condescended to exist in these five states to respond to the universality of religious cravings the Veda, the supreme instrument of knowledge (Pramanam) too exists in five ways, namely (1) the Sruthi (Vedas as such), (2) Pancherathra (the Agamas), (3) the Ithihasas (the epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha,) (4) the Smrithis or the Dharma sastras (Law-codes) like those of Manu, Yagnavalkya, etc, and (5) the Prabandams or the immortal inspirations of saints or Alwars so as to be handy to all types of humanity.

The Vedas as such deal with the transcendental state of god as such in His Paramapada or Vaikunta. The Agamas mainly speak of the forms, the qualities and works of God in His causal state (Vyuha Avastha). The Smrithis like those of Manu and Yagnavalkya, which have lay emphasis on our duty to the various presiding deities of nature like Indra, Varuna, Agni, etc., lay stress on His innate presence in them (Vide Gita chap. VII & IX). The Ithihasas and Puranas describe the purpose and work of the incarnations of God (Avatharas) as Rama, Krishna, etc., There is an oft-quoted Sanskrit verse (Veda Vedye pare pumse Jathe Dhasarathathmaje Vede prachedasathaseeth Sakshath Ramayanathmana), which means, "just as God, the supreme Object of worship pointed to by the Vedas, has Himself condescended, in his infinite mercy, to incarnate as the son of Dhasaratha, the infinite, eternal and impersonal Veda itself has condescended to incarnate as an epic with human authorship as the Ramayana of Valmiki. And it is to the benefit of those like us who were not born at the time of His Avatharas (incarnations) that God, in His infinite condescension exists in the form of images in temples, and Prabandams or the divine inspirations of the Dravidian saints (Alwars) essentially emphasize this aspect of His unbounded love and easy accessibility to all mankind at all times and in all places.



We can get at the infinite greatness of God in His transcendental state (Parathva) only through the Vedas. We can know the special qualities of God in His causal state (Vyuha) only through the Pancharatras. We can realise the innate divine essence (Antaryamithva) of the various presiding deities of nature only through the Smrithis. We can understand the purpose and character of His incarnations (Avatharas) only through the Ithihasas and Puranas. And we can get steeped in the glories of His presence in the images of temples, especially those of the well known one hundred and eight holy places known as Dhivya Desas (Sreerangam, Thirumalai, Kanchi etc.), and His wonderful ways of responding to the devotion of Bhaktas therein, only through the Prabandams or the divine utterances of the Tamil saints known as Alwars (those steeped in the ocean of devotion).

The earliest of the Alwars or the Dravidian saints, by name Poigai Alwar (born at Kanchi) has, for ever, laid the rationale of image-worship thus, "Whatever form His devotees like, that form itself He certainly takes (in His infinite condescension), and by whatsoever name they like to call Him, to that same name He gladly answers....." The divine inspirations of the Dravidian saints, known as the four thousand Tamil songs of the Alwars, express the actual melting of their hearts before the various images of temples. They speak of the universality of divine love in all its various shades and grades and are therefore literally called "the Tamil Vedas". They are the very foundation and form the very essence of Temple-worship and are therefore known as "Archavatara Vedas". So, it is no wonder that these Alwars are popularly known as *Dhivya Suris* or divine-seers, their songs are known as *Dhivya-Prabandams* or divine inspirations and the places sung by them have come to be known as *Dhivya Desas* or divine-spots. The famous Tamil poet, Kambar (who lived in the 9th century A. D.) asks thus in one of his stanzas in "Satakoparanthadi": "Where will all the glories, beauties and the festivities of these temples and their images stand, had not the infinite and eternal Vedas been rendered into easy and sweet Tamil by the Alwars in their universal love?"

There is not a single Vishnu temple in South India in which the images of Alwars and those of their true followers, the great teachers (Acharyas), have not been installed and worshipped, whereas there is not a single image in any temple to the great Rishis like Valmiki or Vyasa or Parasara who have sung their famous Ithihasas and Puranas. The idols of Alwars and Acharyas have been existing in Vishnu temples from very ancient times. There are plenty of authentic and unquestionable records to show that the images of the saints existed in temples even in Ramanu-



ja's time (1017-1137 A. D.). To give but one example, one of the stanzas of "*Srirangarajastavam*" composed by Battar (contemporary of Ramanuja) refers to the images of the ten Alwars standing installed to the east of the tank called Chandra-Pushkarani in the famous Srirangam temple. In most of the Vishnu temples the festivities of Alwars and Acharyas are observed in a manner even grander than the way in which the festivals of the principal deities themselves are conducted. It is because the divine inspirations of saints (Archavataravedas) are held in very high esteem by Vaishnavites such an important place has been assigned to their authors, viz., the Alwars in their temples.

The elders among Vaishnavites will not enter a temple which has not been sung by an Alwar, or wherein the images of Alwars and Acharyas have not been installed. or wherein their Prabandams are not chanted. The great Vedanta Desika, held in very high esteem by all sections of Vaishnavites, even goes to the extent of saying that one will never attain salvation if one does not learn or get attached to the Prabandams of the Alwars. In one of the stanzas of his "*Paduka Sahasram*" he says, "Certain it is that God will never grant salvation to those who do not show their devotion or pay homage to the Alwars and their divine songs, but as it cannot be hoped that all will learn Tamil therefor, the principal one among the Alwars, by name Saint Satakopa (Nammalwar), in his all-embracing love for all, has contrived to take his seat and live at the Feet of God in every temple so that all who bow to them or with whose heads His holy Feet are brought into contact (as it is done in South Indian temples) may easily get His grace and be saved!" It is why the holy Feet of God, in every Vaishnavite temple, are known by the name of "Satakopa" only.

Nay, it will not be an exaggeration to say that most of the Deities in Sri Vaishnavite temples have come to be popularly known only by the names which the Alwars have given them in their respective songs. The presiding Deity of Sri Varadaraja Swami temple of Kancheepuram is known in Sri Vaishnavite parlance only as "*Perarulalan*" (The Great Lord of Grace) and this name was given Him only by an Alwar. Similarly the Lord of Thirukudanthai (Kumbakonam) is only known as "*Aravamudu*" (Insatiable Nector) after the name given Him by Saint Satakopa in his stanzas sung in respect of this Deity. We cannot find such a beautiful name mentioned in any other text, Sanskrit or Tamil. Scores of such instances can be cited. The greatness and glories of Sri Vaishnavite temples rest mainly on the Alwars and their inspired songs. The Alwars are the very souls of these temples and the Prabandams are the very breath of their life.



In the circumstances the duties of those who administer the Vaishnavite temples are obvious. There is a tendency in modern days to view even temples as secular institutions and to include in the programme of festivals such items of entertainment as musical concerts, dances, fire works, etc., etc., involving heavy expenditure and to neglect the ancient usages which were intended to maintain the spiritual atmosphere in a very serene and splendid manner. The danger of such degeneracy is the greater since many who are wielding the reins of temple administration happen to be non-Vaishnavites and cannot, therefore, be expected to know the true spirit and significance of these temples as connected with the Alvars and their Prabandams. It is a pity that in many quarters there is also a growing tendency, and that in modern days with the cry for Tamil everywhere in the air, to show contempt to the Prabandams that they are only Tamil songs and to disrespect the Alvars that they had been only human beings!

In the past too there were a few instances of such a hostile tendency growing up among a section of Vaishnavites themselves against the Alvars and their songs and there have been many litigations too in respect of a good number of temples to fix the honours and rights of those who could chant their Prabandams. A few cases have gone up for decision even to the Privy Council. Most of the judgments pronounced in the courts, from the lowest to the highest, will show what pains the Judges took to get at the real truth and spirit of these temples as associated only with the Alvars and their Tamil Prabandams. Even though most of the judges were non-Vaishnavites and even non-Hindus the high offices and positions they held led them to dive at the real truth and not to swerve from the path of justice.

To cite a concrete instance, the history of the litigations of Sri-Varadarajaswami temple, Kancheepuram is a long tale of woe. Till about one hundred years back things were happening in this temple almost satisfactorily, but degeneracy began to set in from the time the administration of the temple passed into the hands of some trustees who had a great prejudice against the Alvars and their songs. There were independent shrines for all the Alvars in this temple and most of them were allowed to fall into ruins. Most of their festivals were stopped and a vehement attempt was made even to hinder the peaceful chanting of their Prabandams both inside the temple and outside it during processions. So, the matter had to be taken to the courts and a long series of litigations and counter litigations were the result. The most important of them, for obvious reasons, was a scheme case to remove the trustees (who began to claim a sort of hereditary right) from the management of the temple. In the end the claim of the trustees to the right of hereditary trusteeship was rejected by



the High court, which ultimately decided that the executive management should be vested in the hands of a common (non-Vaishnavite) Brahmin officer who was to be appointed and controlled in all matters by the Hindu Religious Endowment Board.

Separate suits had to be instituted for the performance of the Alwars' and Acharyas' festivals (which remained stopped for a long time) as they were being done in olden days and it is only for the last six years, that is, after the management of the temple had changed as mentioned above, that things have almost come to their own, so that the institution has, only now, resumed the character of a true Vaishnavite temple. The trustees mentioned above belonged to an illustrious family (Thathachary) and were originally enjoying many rights and privileges not only in this temple but also in almost all Vishnu temples of Kanchi as well as in the temple of Sriperumbudur (the birth place of Ramanuja) and from the moment they began to show their hostile attitude to the Alwars and the true Acharyas, especially Manavalamahamunigal, their rights commenced to dwindle. This is the remark made in one of the judgments of the High Court of Madras in respect of the Sriperumbudur case.\* It is this attitude that has ultimately left them bereft of all their rights and privileges in all the other temples and only a few honours are now allowed to be enjoyed by them in Sri Varadaraja Swami Temple.

A close study of the conduct of daily worship and festivals of Sri Varadaraja Swami Temple, Kanchi, would show what amount of priority and predominance has been, from very ancient times, allowed to the Alwars and their Prabandams on all occasions. In no other Vishnu temple such a schematic chanting of the four thousand Prabandams is observed at the time of daily Puja as in this temple. During minor festivals many special honours are shown at the time of commencing the Prabandams. The distribution of Sandal (Chandanam) etc., during the Vasantha Uthsavam is made only on the return of the Deity to the temple from the Hanuman shrine when the chanting of the Prabandams is commenced. A special offering of Pansupari etc., (Surulamudu) is similarly made to the Deity at that time during every Panchaparva festival. During the festival conducted in honour of Saint Andal, in the Tamil month of Margali (Dec.—Jan.) her Purdah is removed as a sign of respect only at the time of commencing the Prabandams on the return journey.

During the grand Brahmothsavam (the annual festival celebrated in the Tamil month of Vaikasi (May-June) for ten days the Deity of Varadharaj

\* *Vide Appendix 'A'*



is taken out in procession on a special vehicle (Vahana) both morning and evening on all the ten days to the chanting of appropriate Prabandams. A special feature with this temple is that every vehicle (Vahana) is adapted to the particular portion of the Prabandam to be chanted each time. That is, the vehicle on which the Deity is taken out is only that which is referred to in the part of the Prabandam which is to be chanted during the time. On the morning of the first day there is no vehicle as a mark of respect to the commencement of the Prabandams. In the evening, the first hundred stanzas of Saint Peria Alwar are chanted. Therein the saint accosts God, in one contest, to appear majestically before him as a broad-necked lion. In accordance with this the vehicle of lion (Simma-Vahana) has been fixed by the ancients who were responsible for arranging these festivals. In the portion of the Prabandams that is to be chanted on the morning of the second day there is a reference to God as a bestower of discrimination and the divestor of darkness in the form of the fabulous Swan (Annam-bird, reputed for its keen discrimination) and the vehicle is accordingly the Annam-bird. In the Prabandam to be chanted in the evening of the second day there is a reference to the saint's waking up God from sleep at the time of dawn, and the vehicle of the sun (Soorya-Vahanam) has been accordingly fixed (even though it is the evening time then). On the morning of the third day the Deity is taken out on the famous vehicle of Garuda (the Brahmin-Eagle). This is because the saint concerned wants to bow to the feet of God as He descends from His Heavenly abode flying on the Garuda. (This is the famous Garudotsavam of Kanchi). In the Prabandam to be chanted in the evening there is a reference to Hanuman (the great monkey-ally of Sri Rama) who went as an emissary to Lanka (Ceylon) and the vehicle is accordingly Hanuman. (In the original article a detailed explanation for all the other vehicles is given in a very convincing manner and the same is omitted here as a close knowledge of Tamil will be required to understand the full import of the same). It cannot be maintained for a moment that the routine for the chanting of the Prabandams was fixed in accordance with the order of the vehicles then in vogue, for in chanting the Prabandams it is the same routine that is observed in every other Vishnu temple in South India but the order of the vehicles (Vahanas) during the time of the annual festival varies very much in different places. It is only in this temple this close linkage and affinity between the chanting of Prabandams and the order of vehicles can be seen. This can only prove that those who wielded the reins of this temple's administration in the beginning of its history wanted to give first priority to the Alvars' Prabandams in every festival and at every time of worship.



Lord Varadharaja's attachment to the Alwar's Prabandams is a fact proved beyond refutation. It is well known (vide life of Ramanuja) that He was led to lose Sri Ramanuja himself only on account of His extraordinary partiality for and love of Prabandams. [It is said that Lord Ranganatha wanted to take away Ramanuja to Srirangam in order to appoint him as a successor of Alavandar, the great Vaishnava Acharya. A person who could chant the Prabandams sweetly (Araiyar) was sent to Kanchi for the purpose and Lord Varadha was so entranced at the chanting of the songs that He granted Ramanuja as a boon therefor.] Had it not been for Lord Varadha's Sankalpa (strong wish) behind, the Alwars' Prabandams would not have come to stay in this temple in spite of incessant huge obstacles contrived by hostile interests for decades.

Truth is apt to be forgotten often. The weakness of man asserts itself in spite of his best efforts to suppress it. Howsoever this may be in one's personal affairs, those who are placed in the management of important institutions like temples should get abreast of their personal likes and dislikes and try to maintain their true character and unique flavours in every way keeping themselves in the position of important judges and without yielding to be drawn by local party feelings however inviting they may be for the time being.

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# APPENDIX

“A”

19. M. L. J. 957=3 I. C. 123,

Second Civil Appeals No. 952 to 955 of 1905.

November 4, 1908

Present:—Justice Munro & Justice Abdur Rahim.

A. RAGHUNADACHARIAR & others .... Appellants (*Vadagalai*)

vs

Thiruvengada Ramanujachariar .... Respondent (*Thenkalai*)

**JUDGEMENT:**—The object of the Suit was to obtain a declaration of the Plaintiff's right to the office of the 1st Thirthakar with its honours and emoluments and to restrain the defendants from receiving and enjoying those honours and emoluments.

It is however contended by the learned Vakil for the respondent that the facts admitted or found to be proved in this case not only show that the Plaintiffs did not exercise the office of the 1st Thirthakar any time within 12 years of the suit having been excluded thereby the 1st defendant but that the 1st defendant and his predecessor in the office of Jeer held adverse possession of the office of the 1st Thirthakar by enjoining its honours and emoluments for more than 12 years before the institution of the Suit. We think this contention has been made out. It has been found and the finding being one of fact could not be challenged in second appeal that the plaintiffs ever since 1885 have been altogether excluded from the office of first Thirthakar by the defendant who successfully prevented them from exercising any of its functions and enjoying its privileges. We may observe here that the apparent origin of the dispute which led to the dispossession of Thathacharis is that they wrongly insisted on introducing the Vadagalai Mantram into certain Rituals Instead of Thengalai Mantram.

Appeal dismissed.